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PSU Art and Social Practice

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# Talk to the Gun

PSU Art and Social Practice  
Reference Points

Talk to the Gun

# **Talk to the Gun**

PSU Art and Social Practice  
Reference Points

6

## **Foreword**

Harrell Fletcher

58

## **Australia vs. America**

Gemma-Rose Turnbull

8

## **Introduction**

Gemma-Rose Turnbull

72

## **Mama Didn't Raise a Victim**

Amanda Evans

12

## **Talk to the Gun**

Pedro Reyes

16

## **Pedro Reyes and Antanas Mockus in Conversation**

80

## **Guns Don't Kill People, Mistaking the Relevance of Proximate Causation Does.**

Zachary Gough

24

## **Who Profits?**

Erin Charpentier

84

## **Guns and the Border**

Patricia Vazquez

30

## **Revolutionary Delusions**

Travis Neel

90

## **Interview with Border and Customs Official**

Betty Marín

36

## **A Real Conversation About Guns with Teens**

Grace Hwang

100

## **Listen to the Internet: Guns and Race**

Sharita Towne

## Foreword

**Harrell Fletcher**

Pedro Reyes is one of a few people whom the PSU Art and Social Practice program all agreed would be amazing to work with on a project. We contacted him cold, but he responded enthusiastically and began the process of developing with me and a dozen or so graduate students what we might want to do as part of our end of the school year public event, *Assembly*.

Though Pedro lives in Mexico City and is juggling a full set of international projects, we have been fortunate to spend time with him on a weekly basis online, brainstorming and planning what we would do together. Pedro is well known for his participatory public works related to guns, and so we took that as a starting point. It was decided that we would all take a gun topic and create a chapter for this book, in the hopes that it could serve to help anti-gun advocates understand and argue their cases. A variety of different approaches and forms were used to create the content, while keeping in mind an attempt to be inclusive and to involve as many voices as possible.

*Talk to the Gun* includes a participatory website and public activity (as part of *Assembly 2014*) in which we ask the public to respond to the information we have collected and to then create memes that can be sent out onto the internet in a variety of ways. Our hope, through all of the various approaches, is to further educate ourselves and help in the ongoing attempt to reduce gun violence in all of its forms. We are all thrilled that Pedro generously led us through this process with incredible humor, intelligence, and committed engagement to make this all possible.

## Introduction

**Gemma-Rose  
Turnbull**

This is a diverse collection of facts, stories, interviews, thoughts and images, which serve to illustrate a myriad of ways to think about the role guns play in our culture and lives. It also illustrates the diversity of the group who collated them. The contributors to this project include two internationally renowned artists and a group of Art and Social Practice MFA students from different parts of the Americas—Mexico, Canada and the US—and a visiting scholar from Australia.

Each of us have had very different experiences, cultural contexts and interactions with guns and gun culture, but the content provided by our different approaches might also betray a shared politic; this book is intended to furnish the anti-gun movement with a series of anecdotes, points, quotes and statistics to argue their position. This is a blatantly political motivation, but it is also personal; I've never touched a gun, and yet, when we discuss guns my lip curls in the same sneer of revolted fear as my colleague Travis Neel's does—and he is no stranger to recreational shooting.

But we have included dissenting opinions too: interviews with teens from a local school, including a fifteen-year-old gun owner; the mother of a contributor who argues for the Second Amendment and arms for self-protection; the former mayor of Bogotá Antanas Mockus; and a Customs Enforcement and Border Protection Officer who learned how to shoot a gun for his job. This is not just an exercise in regurgitating facts that support our case—we are also genuinely interested in connecting with a variety of people and places, in an effort to understand perspectives that are different from our own.

A book is such a definitive statement; a summary of what is. A conversation is more fluid, more inviting, allowing more space for questions, and claiming fewer

answers. Our greatest hope for this book is that it becomes the starting point for a further reaching and more nuanced, expansive conversation—a meeting ground where we, and the other people that choose to join us (now and in the future), pick apart the strands of inquiry and interest. Our statement remains the same—this project and book are firmly anti-gun—but as we proceed we hope to layer that statement with more voices and perspectives.



## Talk to the Gun

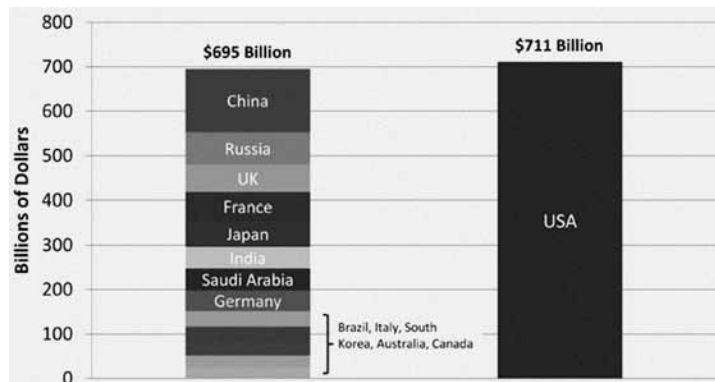
### Pedro Reyes

Over the last six years more than 130,000 Mexicans have been killed in drug-related violence.<sup>1</sup> There are now voluntary gun donation campaigns throughout the country. People are eager to clean out the huge number of weapons that Calderón's presidential term brought. But we can't stop the flow of guns on our own; we need change within the United States.

As it stands now, the United States is an extremely dangerous neighbor. It's impossible to buy a weapon in Mexico; there are no armories here. But with such lax gun laws across the border, drug traffickers only need to take a short drive to Walmart or any other of the nearly 7,000 gun retail shops along the US-Mexico border.<sup>2</sup>

*Talk to the Gun* is the latest in a series of undertakings I have participated in dealing with gun violence. The first one was *Palas por Pistolas*, initiated in 2008 and still ongoing. I helped to organize a campaign to collect firearms that resulted in 1,527 guns collected, which were melted down to produce the same number of shovels to plant 1,527 trees. This led to *Imagine* (2012) and *Disarm* (2013), both of which consist of a series of musical instruments made out of 6,700 firearms collected and destroyed by the Mexican Army. I think about these projects as a form of exorcism, expelling a demon that has overtaken the body. In the United States, demons of war and violence possess the social body. There are eighty-nine guns for every hundred citizens<sup>3</sup> in the United States, and the country spent more than the next thirteen highest investing nations *combined* on its military in 2011.<sup>4</sup>

Most recently, *Amendment to the Amendment* (2014) was an exercise that tried to avoid constraining the discussion of the Second Amendment to what would be its *correct* interpretation and instead gave the public the radical task of rewriting the amendment itself. Over 200 people

Defense Budget Chart<sup>5</sup>

participated in this event organized by the University of Florida in South Tampa, a city that had recently been witness to the appalling murder of Trayvon Martin and the shootings at the Wesley Chapel movie theater.

The cultural rejection of weapons as an industry must come about if we want to see real change in the prevalence of guns. Investing money in a company that makes weapons should be regarded as dirty—a sin. If you are investing in weapons, you are fuelling death and suffering around the world. It should be a responsibility for everyone on earth to go on a crusade against guns.

Change will be difficult; even setting aside the economic interests for maintaining the status quo, I believe there is a certain amount of violence in our nature that we can't eliminate. We have to find ways to sublimate that violent energy, like smashing guitars into pieces or shouting into a microphone. If the people who set off bombs or commit school shootings had the opportunity to become artists, maybe they would be doing political art and not bombing!

1. "The Mexican Undead: Toward a New History of the "Drug War" Killing Fields." *Small Wars Journal*. Small Wars Foundation, 21 Aug. 2013. Web. <<http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/the-mexican-undead-toward-a-new-history-of-the-drug-war-killing-fields%20>>.
2. Johnson, Tim. "253,000 US Guns Smuggled to Mexico Annually, Study Finds." *Truthout*. Truthout, 19 Mar. 2013. Web. <<http://truth-out.org/news/item/15202-253000-us-guns-smuggled-to-mexico-annually-study-finds>>.
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4. Plumer, Brad. "America's Staggering Defense Budget, in Charts." *Washington Post*. The Washington Post, 07 Jan. 2013. Web. <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/wp/2013/01/07/everything-chuck-hagel-needs-to-know-about-the-defense-budget-in-charts/>>.
5. Plumer, Brad. "America's Staggering Defense Budget, in Charts." *Washington Post*. The Washington Post, 07 Jan. 2013. Web. <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/wp/2013/01/07/everything-chuck-hagel-needs-to-know-about-the-defense-budget-in-charts/>>.

## Pedro Reyes and Antanas Mockus in Conversation

*Antanas Mockus, the former Mayor of Bogotá, presided as mayor for two (non-consecutive) terms, during which he became known for springing surprising and humorous initiatives upon the city's inhabitants<sup>1</sup>. These tended to involve grand gestures—taking a shower in a commercial about conserving water, the installation of traffic mimes on street corners, or walking the streets dressed in spandex and a cape as Supercitizen.<sup>2</sup> He also put in place “Women’s Night,” in which the city’s men were asked to stay home for an evening to look after the house and the children. The city sponsored free open-air concerts, bars offered women-only specials, and the city’s female police were in charge of keeping the peace.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, under Mockus’ leadership, the homicide rate of Bogotá fell 70% after he introduced a citywide ban on carrying guns in public.<sup>4</sup>*

*In March 2014, he had a conversation with his friend Pedro Reyes about gun culture. This conversation was conducted in Spanish, and we have kept the original transcription as well as the translation to honor that.*

PEDRO REYES: En México un proceso de “paramilitarización” con las “autodefensas”. ¿Cuál es el origen de los grupos paramilitares?

*In Mexico there’s a process of “paramilitarization” of the “self-defense groups.” What is the origin of these paramilitary groups?*

ANTANAS MOCKUS: Cuando se intenta cerrar la violencia clásica liberal conservadora, quedan algunos grupos por fuera. Pero desde antes de ese proceso de paz, habían sitios irregulares. Es frecuente en la historia de Colombia y también en otras latitudes, que exista como una especie de embrión

de fuerza pública nacional enfrentada a otra igual, pero ambas apoyándose en grupos locales. El lío de los ejércitos nacionales es que terminan operando casi siempre como ejércitos de invasión. Es decir, no conocen el territorio, no conocen a la gente, no tienen una larga tradición de colaboración con la gente. Entonces para mí el paramilitarismo nace tal vez de una frase de Napoleón, esto está en Carl Schmitt, en *Teoría del partisano*. En una carta a uno de sus generales, dice Napoleón: “a la guerrilla no se la puede combatir sino con sus propios métodos”. La teoría de la irregularidad de la guerra, marxista digamos, se le opone de una forma irregular.

*When there's an attempt to end the classical-liberal conservative violence, some groups are left out. But even before that peace process happens, there are irregular sites. It's commonly seen in the history of Colombia, and other latitudes, that something exists—something like the embryo of a situation in which a public national force confronts an equal, but with both drawing their support from local groups. The confusing thing with national armies is that they almost always end up functioning as armies of invasion. That is to say, they don't know the territory, they don't know the people, they don't have a long tradition of collaboration with the people. Therefore for me, paramilitarization is born perhaps from a phrase by Napoleon, this is in Carl Schmitt, in Theory of a Partisan. In a letter to one of his generals, Napoleon says: “you cannot fight guerilla groups without using their methods.” The theory of the irregularity of war, let's say marxist theory, opposes it in an irregular form.*

PR: Te refieres asimétrica? O irregular en qué aspecto?

*Are you referring to asymmetry? Or irregularity in what respect?*

AM: Sí, mmm... siempre vienes con preguntas complicadas.

*Yes, hmm...you always come with complicated questions.*

[risas]

[laughter]

AM: O sea, no es mi misión justificar al paramilitarismo. Tal vez deba señalar primero los límites: primero, eso va contra la constitución, segundo eso socaba digamos el acercamiento de la gente a la constitución, eso privilegia a los resultados por encima de los métodos, y digamos la síntesis de todo eso es “ve con cuidado tú mi amigo, porque terminarás pareciéndote a él”. Entonces, cuando una sociedad toma el paramilitarismo como solución, pues de algún modo se proyecta hacia el futuro por una vía muy problemática. En África se habla de “vigilantismo”. El vigilantismo es cierta tendencia a la autodefensa. Ahora, hay casos de autodefensa que nacen bajo las alas de la fuerza pública legal, como una ciudad irregular pero dirigida por oficiales regulares que obviamente cometen al actuar de esa manera delito grave. Hay autodefensa que nace de los propios perjudicados por la propia actividad delictiva: los esmeralderos, en Colombia, los narcotraficantes, pero lo que más típicamente se da es fuerza pública que al ser nacional, no tiene suficiente información, no tiene suficiente familiaridad con los escenarios locales, con los actores locales, entonces no puede desentrañar los misterios de lo local. Gracias a su componente irregular, las autodefensas sí logran penetrar. Yo filmé un par de notas en televisión sobre paramilitarismo a comienzos de 1998 y entrevisté a Uribe ahí. Claramente la Fiscalía de

Medellín reconoció que ya en ese momento las CONVIVIR (Cooperativas de Vigilancia y Seguridad Privada para la autodefensa agraria) estaban fuera de control estatal. Filmé a los paramilitares de espaldas, ocultando su identidad, lo cual también es significativo, ya que si eres parte de una fuerza legal no te clandestinizas. En ese caso, se filmó un operativo conjunto entre la policía y CONVIVIR, que son las precursoras de los grupos paramilitares en Colombia. Yo logré que se transmitiera en televisión un simulacro, que fue una pelea dura, porque ya en ese momento había gente interesada en presentar esa alianza como un hecho.

*What I'm saying is that it's not really my mission to justify paramilitarization. Perhaps it's better that I indicate the limitations: first, it goes against the constitution, second, it basically interferes with people learning more about the constitution, it privileges the results over the methods, and we can say that the synthesis of all of this is: "be careful because you may end up turning into him your enemy." In Africa people talk about "vigilantism". Vigilantism is a tendency towards self-defense. Now, there are cases of self-defense that are born under the wings of legal public enforcement, like an irregular city but directed by regular officials who are obviously committing serious crimes by acting this way. There is self-defense born from the people affected by criminal activity: the emerald miners, the drug traffickers; but what is more common is public enforcement that, by being national, doesn't have enough information, isn't familiar with the local scene, the local actors, so isn't able to unravel local mysteries. Thanks to its irregular composition, it is able to penetrate the self-defenses. I filmed a couple of television news stories about paramilitarism at the beginning of 1998 and I interviewed Uribe there.*

*Clearly, the Prosecutor's office of Medellin recognized at that moment that CONVIVIR (Surveillance and Private Security Cooperatives for Agrarian Self-Defense Groups) were out of the state's control. I filmed the paramilitaries anonymously, hiding their identity, which is also significant, because if you are part of a legal force you aren't supposed to be clandestine. In this case, a joint operation between the police and CONVIVIR was filmed, which is the forerunner to the paramilitary groups in Colombia. I was able to transmit a simulation via TV, which was a tough battle, because at that moment there were people interested in presenting this alliance as a fact.*

PR: ¿Pero se usa también el término para las mismas fuerzas del narcotráfico o existen dos términos distintos?

*But is the term used for the same narcotrafficking forces, or are there two different terms?*

AM: En el caso colombiano, digamos la subversión, la guerrilla, se refiere a la izquierda, mientras que paramilitares y autodefensa se refiere más bien a derecha. En algún momento las FARC se quisieron llamar "autodefensas campesinas", entonces hay anomalías dentro de la asignación de la etiqueta, pero digamos lo clave es la comprensión del rol centralísimo que juega el monopolio del uso de la fuerza dentro de la teoría del Estado normal. Cuando te das la vuelta por estados fallidos, ahí puedes encontrar como que un Estado a punto de volverse fallido, o estando fallido, puede creer que encuentre una buena solución en armar parte de su población civil y organizarla como autodefensa.

*In Colombia's case, we can say that subversion, the guerrilla, refers to the left, while paramilitary and self-defense refers more to the right. At one point FARC [Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia] wanted to call itself "peasant self-defense." So there are anomalies with how the label is assigned, but we can say the key is understanding the extremely central role played by the monopoly on the use of force within the theory of the normal state. When you take a trip through failed states, you can find something there like a state on the brink of failure or that's failing, the state can believe that a good solution is found in arming its civilian population and organizing it as self-defense.*

PR: ¿Tú crees que exista alguna conexión entre el mercado de armas y la guerra contra las drogas? Es decir, que la guerra contra las drogas sea algo que esté promovido por intereses, que mientras tengas una guerra vas a tener a gente que compre armas?

*Do you think there is any connection between the arms trade and the drug war? That is, that the war on drugs might be something that is promoted by interests, that while you have a war, you're going to have people that buy guns?*

AM: Pues está como en la lógica de las cosas. La guerra es un negocio grande para muchos, no sólo para el traficante de armas, sino para el lavador de activos que consigue plata. Trata de imaginarte una ofensiva militar fuerte, pues es un esfuerzo financiero grande. Por ahí leí, pero puedo estar erradísimo, que 20% de la economía mundial era ilegal. Es un estimativo obvio y pueden estar equivocados, pues de 10 a 40 sería el rango. Pero 20% de la economía del mundo

siendo ilegal, eso da para mucho tiempo. Es un enemigo suficientemente fuerte como para mantener dentro de su lógica al Estado. Habría que ver si se puede hacer resistencia civil contra la ilegalidad. Para mí es casi la única solución, pero es un camello, porque usted tendría que cargarse de amorosidad.

*Well, it's basically in the logic of things. War is big business for a lot of people, not just for the arms dealer, but also for the money launderer making dough. Picture a strong military offensive, well it's a big financial effort. I read somewhere, but I could be completely wrong, that 20% of the world economy was illegal. It's an obvious estimate, and they could be wrong, and so 10% and 40% would be the range. But with 20% of the world economy being illegal, that could go on a long time. It's an enemy strong enough to keep the State within its logic. We would have to see if a civil resistance could challenge the illegality. For me it is almost the only solution, but it's hard work, because you would have to be charged by great lovingness.*

1. Marsh, Sarah. "Antanas Mockus: Colombians fear ridicule more than being fined." *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media Limited, 28 Oct. 2013. Web. <<http://www.theguardian.com/public-leaders-network/2013/oct/28/antanas-mockus-bogota-mayor>>.

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## Who Profits?

**Erin Charpentier**

Founded in 1871, the National Rifle Association claims to promote firearm safety, training, ownership, marksmanship, and hunting. In fact, the NRA is one of the largest and most influential lobbying groups in Washington, with the main political objective of protecting the Second Amendment rights of Americans. Over the last few decades, they have successfully affected legislation to weaken gun control measures since the Columbine and Virginia Tech shootings.<sup>1</sup> With nearly 4 million members, the NRA only represents a small fraction of the nation's gun owners. So why is their voice the loudest? Who exactly is the NRA representing and who profits from their efforts?

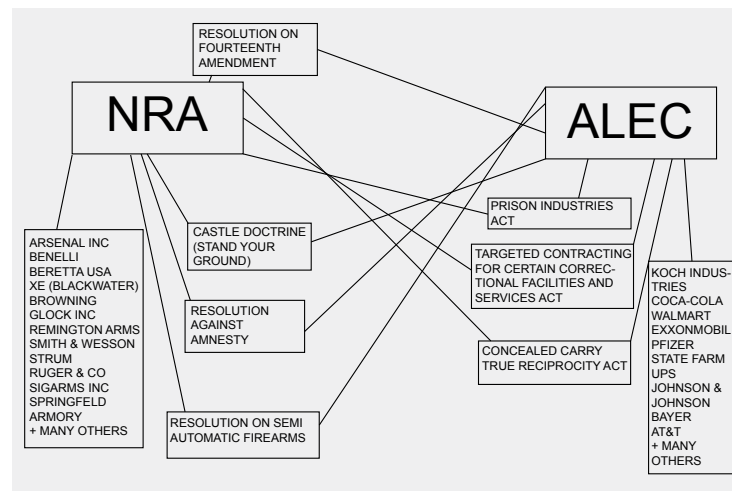
The NRA is extremely effective in its political endeavors due to both foot power and financial power. Using scare tactics and rhetoric, they can mobilize a massive volunteer base in local and state level campaigns. In addition to utilizing the funding and grassroots organization of their membership, the NRA is heavily reliant on financial support from the firearms manufacturing industry. This relationship is mutually beneficial. The NRA receives millions of dollars in donations, and gun manufacturers get relentless lobbying for laws that ensure a place in the market for their controversial products. In 1999, then NRA president Charlton Heston addressed the gun company executives at the annual SHOT show, "Your fight has become our fight," he said. "Your legal threat has become our constitutional threat."<sup>2</sup>

After heavy lobbying in 2005, the NRA was able to influence Congress to pass a measure effectively protecting gun makers and distributors from liability lawsuits related to gun violence.<sup>3</sup> The NRA has since received between \$14–38 million in contributions from the firearms industry. MidwayUSA, a company that sells controversial high capacity magazines,

allows their customers the option of rounding their purchase up to the nearest dollar and donating the difference to the NRA through their “Round Up” program. MidwayUSA claims “No company in America is more dedicated to, and more supportive of, the goals of the National Rifle Association than MidwayUSA,” and to date, they have raised \$9,829,948.72 through their “Round Up” program.<sup>4</sup>

The connection between the NRA and its corporate bedfellows does not begin and end with the firearms industry. NRA is an active participant in the American Legislative Exchange Council; a powerful corporate bill-mill, largely funded by Koch Industries, where lobbyists develop and vote on model bills alongside state legislators.<sup>5</sup> Many of these model bills are introduced into law (see diagram), most notably the Castle Doctrine. Also known as “stand your ground” and “shoot first” in the 24 states that recognize it, this controversial law enables individuals to use deadly force in self-defense both within and outside of their homes. This law was made famous when a Florida jury acquitted George Zimmerman of second-degree murder and manslaughter charges after he fatally shot Trayvon Martin, an unarmed black teenager.<sup>6</sup> This case caused so much controversy that many of ALEC’s corporate members, such as Coca-Cola and Walmart, have broken their ties for fear of backlash. The murderers of several other unarmed young people have been protected by these laws as well, as seen in the case Wisconsin’s Bo Morrison, who was fatally shot while hiding on the porch of a neighboring house when an underage drinking party was broken up; or Pennsylvania’s Brandon Zeth, who was also fatally shot when he mistakenly knocked at a house he thought was his girlfriend’s.<sup>7</sup>

Clearly the firearms industry is profiting from the nation’s inadequate gun laws. Federal law allows people to buy guns



For many years, until 2011, the NRA was the co-chair of the ALEC “Task Force on Public Safety and Elections.” This figure depicts the bills they worked on together, and their respective corporate partners. This is not a comprehensive list, and many of the corporations listed have distanced themselves from ALEC since 2011.<sup>12</sup>

in 32 states without showing ID or getting a background check<sup>8</sup> despite the 83% of Americans who support mandatory criminal background checks.<sup>9</sup> Gun shows provide unique loopholes for individuals to acquire guns quickly and without question, a legal weakness that has been exploited by known terrorist groups such as al Qaeda and Hezbollah.<sup>10</sup> Assault rifles and high capacity magazines are still readily available and seeing record profits with the “threat” of gun control measures looming.

Since we know who is profiting from these legal allowances, the next question involves ideological motivation. It would be difficult to look at the many questionable bills introduced by these corporate conglomerates and not see an overarching oppressive narrative. Prison privatization,



the “three strikes” law, the prison industries act, the voter ID act, and the “stand your ground” law, and countless others affect people of color disproportionately and with grave consequences. By assuming a neutral position in relation to gun control, we effectively enable over-zealous corporate bigots to make our laws and determine the value of human life. Of course, this problem extends far beyond the gun debate. A new scientific study released by Princeton University concludes that America’s government is basically an oligarchy.”

*If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality.*

—Desmond Tutu

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2. Stone, Peter H. “NRA Gun Control Crusade Reflects Firearms Industry Financial Ties.” *The Huffington Post*. TheHuffingtonPost.com, 11 Jan. 2013. Web. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/01/11/nra-gun-control-firearms-industry-ties\\_n\\_2434142.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/01/11/nra-gun-control-firearms-industry-ties_n_2434142.html)
3. Ibid.
4. This in addition to the Patterson family’s private donations. <http://www.midwayusa.com/nra-support>
5. “ALEC Exposed.” *ALEC Exposed*. Center for Media and Democracy, n.d. Web. [http://www.alecexposed.org/wiki/ALEC\\_Exposed](http://www.alecexposed.org/wiki/ALEC_Exposed)
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8. Gerdes, Louise I. *Gun Violence: Opposing Viewpoints*. Farmington Hills, MI: Greenhaven, 2011. Print.
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11. McKay, Tom. “Princeton Concludes What Kind of Government America Really Has, and It’s Not a Democracy.” *PolicyMic*. PolicyMic, 16 Apr. 2014. Web. <http://www.policymic.com/articles/87719/princeton-concludes-what-kind-of-government-america-really-has-and-it-s-not-a-democracy>
12. “ALEC Exposed.” *ALEC Exposed*. Center for Media and Democracy, n.d. Web. <[http://www.alecexposed.org/wiki/ALEC\\_Exposed](http://www.alecexposed.org/wiki/ALEC_Exposed)>.

## Revolutionary Delusions

### Travis Neel



Russ Dizdar, "The Black Awakening."<sup>1</sup>

*Chaos, it's all about chaos, but in "their" terms. Chaos; bloodshed means ritual blood, doorways open for the demons to flow in, so Virginia-tech occurring at 50,000 places in the United States in one week, you will not miss the black awakening, this chaos before the apocalypse.*  
—Russ Dizdar from his sermon "The Black Awakening."<sup>2</sup>

As you read this text there are autonomous domestic militias training, hoarding food, and strategizing in preparation for a revolutionary, national disaster, post-rapture scenario. These citizen soldiers are obsessed with self-preservation in the event of an emergency survival or defense situation. "For Jesus Till The End! These are words we defend, with our lives," is the motto of the Hutaree Christian Warriors militia based in Michigan.<sup>3</sup> This paranoid and well armed group of militants are "Guard Dogs for God"<sup>4</sup> ready to fight the one world military, a fundamentalist Christian and right-wing conspiracy theory, which posits that politicians, members of the US Military, and the U.N. are all part of a plot by Lucifer to rule the world by dissolving national borders and constructing

an authoritarian government called the New World Order.<sup>5</sup> The Hutaree is prepared to conduct both spiritual and material warfare against the worldwide anarchy that precedes the beast system of the antichrist.

What's the connection between these reality-challenged militias and the National Rifle Association? Historical research on conservative movements, whose rank and file consist of mainly white and politically conservative men, suggest that many of these groups are motivated into action by "status anxieties" or concerns about losing social standing and prestige.<sup>6</sup> Any perceived threat to the culturally dominant groups' power and status serve as symbols to rally and fight against. The dominant group has constructed an "American" identity based on romanticized nostalgia for an idealized past.

Nobody was better at manufacturing this nostalgic sentiment than Charlton Heston, actor and former president of the NRA. In the film "A Patriot at the Podium,"<sup>7</sup> produced and for sale on the NRA website, you can view a curated selection of Heston's didactic speeches and videos. Heston's oration is charming, warm, and full of style. He deliberately and persuasively appeals to the "basic American values of God and family" when he addresses the audience at the 1998 Conservative Political Action Conference<sup>8</sup> saying, "Friends, let me tell you, we are again engaged in a great civil war, a culture war that is about to hijack you right out of your own birthright. And I fear that you may no longer trust the pulsing lifeblood inside you that made this country rise from mud and valor into the miracle that it still is."

It is "threats" to this constructed American social identity, that motivate conservative social groups into action. Members of these groups act as "moral agents" fighting against "moral threats" portrayed by the symbolic "other,"

whether it be immigrants, the LGBTQ community, feminists, communists, people of color, liberals, anarchists,<sup>9</sup> etc. The NRA is arguably one of the most influential conservative groups constructing both legislation and rhetoric to fight against perceived threats to its constituency.

In March 1989, California passed a law requiring all gun owners to register their automatic weapons. In the first year of the law, only 7,000 of an estimated 300,000 privately owned guns were registered. Gun lobbying groups rallied around a revolutionary rhetoric associating non-compliance with the law with an act of civil disobedience on par with the actions of Martin Luther King Jr. Fred Romero, an NRA field representative in Southern California, said, "the Second Amendment is there as a balance of power. It is literally a loaded gun in the hands of the people held to the heads of government."<sup>10</sup> Conservative movements, such as the NRA, appropriate the discourse of their opponents and, through a process of re-framing (frame transformation), are able to redefine their movement as advocacy for justice. This is done through a process of portraying any limitations placed on their right to bear arms as equal to the injustices experienced by other marginalized groups, and claiming that they are the "real" advocates of civil rights. This strategy of re-framing works to portray themselves as victims of state action and liberal organizations.

The NRA has constructed a narrative that closely aligns its members' struggles with that of the Founding Fathers and their struggle for freedom. "The NRA frames its supporters as patriots and freedom fighters, picking up the fight for individual rights and freedoms initiated by the Founding Fathers and white male pioneers. Upholding such historical icons reinforces the dominant status of white men, who make up the



Hutaree Christian Warriors insignia<sup>15</sup>

bulk of NRA members.”<sup>11</sup> At the 2010 Conservative Political Action Conference, president of the NRA Wayne LaPierre received loud cheers when he said, “Freedom is nothing but dust in the wind till it’s guarded by the blue steel and dry powder of a free and armed people...Our Founding Fathers understood that the guys with the guns make the rules.”<sup>12</sup>

As the Hutaree have taken up arms to defend themselves from an imaginary evil, republican candidates in the 2014 mid-term election have taken up the gun to create campaign advertisements. In Alabama’s District-6, candidate Will Brooke has created a campaign ad titled “Let’s Do Some Damage.”<sup>13</sup> In Brooke’s ad he “has some fun exercising his Second Amendment rights” and shoots various guns, using a copy of the Affordable Care act as a target. In the end of the ad, Brooke uses a wood-chopper to shred the Affordable care act asunder, while calling for a “market based” solution to healthcare.

The radical right-wing construction of “American” identity is constantly under threat. It is a profitable venture to align the defense of freedom with the purchase of a gun. The white male minority and corporate oligarchy<sup>14</sup> is profiting in the fight to preserve its economic, political, and symbolic power.

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## A Real Conversation About Guns with Teens

Grace Hwang

I'm a high school art teacher at a small charter school based on democratic education in Portland, Oregon. I introduced Pedro's work during a high school meeting and invited students to come during their lunch break or after school to talk with me about their views on guns. Over two days, four conversations, and a lot of snacks, fifteen students and one passing parent shared their views with me. They are represented here by their pseudonyms, age, and preferred gender: Atti, fifteen, male; Kaneo, eighteen, male; ChadWarden, seventeen, male; Vivian, seventeen, female; SheCommander, seventeen, female; The Saint, sixteen, male; Velveteen, sixteen, female; Francois, sixteen, male; Jean-Luc, sixteen, male; Geramy-kun, fifteen, gender fluid; Ponyboy, seventeen, male; SwifTail, fifteen, female; Batman, sixteen, female; Bob Ross, seventeen, female; and John Doe, seventeen, male.

Below is an interview with Atti, and collected fragments from small group conversations with the other students.

...

*Did you grow up with guns?*

Atti: Uh, yeah, I did. Around age eight is when I started shooting.

*What kind of guns were you shooting at age eight?*

Atti: Uh, you know, a .22? You know what that is right? It's a really small bullet, about this big—it's not a pistol it's a rifle.

*The long one?*

Atti: Yeah, the long one but it's not a shotgun. You know the difference between a rifle and a shotgun?

No.

Atti: The shotgun shoots shells, and what they do is have a bunch of little BB's in the shell so they spread out—you use them to hunt birds because it's really hard to shoot a bird down in air with a rifle.

*Mm-hmm.*

Atti: Cuz it's just one projectile. So I was shooting at like age eight and, eventually, I started hunting at around age eleven. Guns don't really scare me all that much because I've been introduced to them for so long. Yeah, that's pretty much it—I've grown up with guns—my family owns guns—I own guns.

*So what kind of gun is yours?*

Atti: I own a shotgun, a .22 and a .30-30 lever action.

*What is that?*

Atti: You know, the cowboy western movies?

*Oh a revolver?*

Atti: No. It's a rifle—and you go like—that—[hand gesture] to reload it—that's what I own. That's called a lever action.

*Hum.*

Atti: Uh hum.

*Do you and your family have a place that you like to go hunt?*

Atti: I usually hunt with my grandpa and my dad. Last time I went hunting was for pheasant but it was rabbit season so I got a rabbit. Then before that I went to Canada to shoot geese and duck. That was fun. In Canada, the really nice thing—is the Canadian geese. I shot one and it weighed twenty pounds.

*That's big!*

Atti: And that's a bird that can fly! I held it—it's like the size of a small dog.

*That's crazy.*

Atti: Bigger than a Chihuahua, Pomeranian, it was like if you had a Jack Russell terrier or something.

*That's a big bird. So you listed three types of guns that you own. Where do you keep them?*

Atti: We keep them in a safe. Locked. In the basement. We never have them out in the open or anything like that.

*I just learned about Oregon's Open Carry Law.*

Atti: Yeah, my uncle has an open carry permit. And my dad is gonna get one, I think. So, are you gonna ask my opinion on that? It's been around for a while and you have to renew it every couple of years, I think? And it actually saved my uncle once.

*Oh yeah?*

Atti: He was getting attacked by a Pitbull. He was walking and he was walking in this bad part of his neighborhood with his girlfriend, and this Pitbull, it was in this yard, jumps over the fence at him and starts coming at him, and he has his dog—and his dog would not have been able to take this thing down—so he pulls out his pistol and he shoots it in the head. But their skulls are so thick that the bullet hit it in the head, but it probably just ricocheted off the skull, and the thing ran off.

*Oh my god!*

Atti: Mm-hmm.

*So you don't know if the dog was alive or not.*

Atti: It definitely hurt it and scared it.

*That's scary!*

Atti: Yeah, but that's the only reason why he didn't get mauled.

*Wow. Well it's a good thing your uncle didn't get hurt. And the dog ran away?*

Atti: I think if the dog had died it wouldn't have been that big of a deal. Cuz the thing shouldn't be alive if it's going to hurt other things, like people!

*Here's another question: I was looking up our school's policy on guns at school...*

Atti: It's gonna fall under expulsion, immediately. On school premises.

*Yeah.*

Atti: That makes perfect sense.

*So you would never bring a gun to school.*

Atti: No. Never.

*Have you been at this school since you were little?*

Atti: Yeah, since fourth grade.

*Has there ever been a situation where...?*

Atti: There was a bomb threat once.

*I heard about that.*

Atti: Yeah, a high school kid, messing around. Then I think there was a bank robbery a couple blocks away at one point. So we all had to be locked in, but that's it.

*What about teachers, do you think teachers should have guns?*

Atti: No. Kids could easily get a hold of them if they really wanted to. There are some people who say, well—Obama's kids—they're guarded at school by armed snipers on their school roof.

*That's crazy.*

Atti: Well, it's the President's kids so I can see that. I just don't think it's a good idea for teachers to have guns. I think if they wanted to keep a baseball bat or something in the room, but I do think there should be a better way. Like, if someone were to come in here and start shooting up the school, there should be a better way for getting help here instead of waiting five minutes for the cops to get here.

*True. Have you seen the documentary about the history of 3D printing guns? There's a guy who figured out how to 3D print a gun.*

Atti: It's not a full gun. I've seen that before—it's not a full gun. It can't be a full gun. The firing pins? It's impossible! The gun would melt. It would get too hot. The barrel would melt and tear apart. I've seen that before. What he made was an upper and lower receiver for an A-15.

*That's pretty amazing though, the potential for anyone to print and assemble a gun at home.*

Atti: They would break a lot faster. Cuz you'd need to print out each part and you might not know how to assemble it correctly.

*It could blow up in your hand.*

Atti: You'd probably have more breakage with the parts. Have you ever shot a gun?

*I have.*

Atti: What kind?

*I'm not sure. The bullets were in shells.*

Atti: Were they in yellow-like shells—like this big [makes a hand gesture indicating about two-and-a-half inches in length]? Or circular or tube brass shells? Like that big [indicates about an inch]?

*Yeah that one [the second one].*

Atti: You shot a .22. Did it have no recoil at all?

*I don't remember? My dad's friend was helping me hold it—I was like ten years old—so if there was recoil...*

Atti: There wouldn't have been. How did it feel?

*It was exhilarating. I felt shocked and tingly. And then, me and my friend went under the wooden deck to pick up the shells, which were hot.*

Atti: Yeah. Depends on the person, on how they feel.

*How about you?*

Atti: It's fun—to pull that trigger and just see that can explode, or something like that.

## ON ACCESS TO GUNS

*Do you guys know where to get a gun if you really needed to have one?*



Kaneo: Yeah

ChadWarden: Yes

Sully: Yes

*It's pretty easy to access one?*

Vivian: Yeah

ChadWarden: I know where I'd get it

...

Sully: I think, from the aspect of gun ownership, that it's almost too easy to own a gun.

Vivian: Yeah, It's too easy to get a gun.

Sully: Until recently, I didn't realize how easy. I went into a Bi-Mart and they sell guns! At Bi-Mart! Just like "Hey kid..."

Bob Ross: "...here's your gun!"

Vivian: They sell guns at Walmart.

...

Sully: I will probably never own a gun, unless it's to use for some art project or as reference. I know lots of artists that have guns, and they take all the guts out of them and just have the hollow case of the gun that they use for reference, or they have gun replicas. Which I can totally see myself doing.

...

The Saint: We are the #1 zombie-proof country in the world.

Vivian: What? No. I don't believe that.

John Doe: There's more guns than people here.

The Saint: Did you see *World War Z*?

ChadWarden: It's Israel.

Sully: Oh god, of course it's Israel!

ChadWarden: In the *World War Z* movie it's Israel—the most zombie-proof country.

## ON PERSONAL EXPERIENCES WITH GUNS

Velveteen: I've shot a handgun before. It was kinda cool.

SheCommander: Yeah, I'm not gonna lie, it was totally fun.

Velveteen: I mean, it was fun and cool, but the whole concept of them is scary. Like one misstep and...

SheCommander: Someone could be dead.

Ponyboy: The other thing scary thing is that they're a tool that wasn't made for any other purpose but as a weapon to kill people. Like they weren't some kind of hammer that you would use to nail stuff.

## ON GUNS AND VIOLENT VIDEO GAMES

*Do you think there's a valid argument that playing violent video games encourages violence in real life?*

John Doe: Are you asking me if I think that violent video games could lead to violence in real life? No. I don't think so. I think it falls a lot on the parents.

There's kids that have gotten their video games taken away—like there's this one kid who got his Halo taken away, and then in the middle of the night he killed his parents, and then played the video game. And I mean, that kid clearly has something wrong with him! I don't blame that on the video games, I blame that on the kid himself.

Sully: And the world around the kid.

John Doe: I mean, how'd the fourteen-year-old kid get a gun? Keep it in a safe! Or in a place he can't reach or something.

...

ChadWarden: No. It's very, very separated. It's a clear fantasy, usually. Oftentimes, if a game gets really realistic in its violence, people are unwilling to play it.

Sully: It's more influenced by the media. There is a hyper gun obsession in media for sure, I mean, not just—*kids who play video games are gonna go crazy and shoot people*—I don't think that, but video games, and tv shows, and movies, and everything just has guns all over it. We have a gun-obsessed culture that really, rarely shows the consequences of screwing around with a gun.

Bob Ross: It just leads us all to desensitize violence. And it's glorified to an extent.

ChadWarden: Yeah, oddly enough, recently the violence in movies is less toned down. Like people are dying left and right but it's less graphic and violent, and it's just this thing that's happening:

Sully: Exactly—it numbs death.

...

Francois: I would like to act in a movie where I could be like James Bond and shoot a gun.

*How come?*

Francois: Um, because it's badass?

Sully: For the same reason why we think cigarettes are cool—these are symbols of power and coolness, no matter how much we know they're bad for us.

Francois: Also, he's licensed to kill, so...

...

Sully: I'm totally sadistic in video games and in writing and drawing. I LOVE drawing organs and people bleeding all over them, and when I play video games I'm like, *I'm just gonna murder all these people rahhhh*, and in my writing *No one's happy, ever! You're gonna die!* When I'm writing my sole objective is how can I make someone cry when they're reading this. But in reality, I have really high levels of empathy for other humans. And even

when people are like, “This guy killed a person!” I’m still like, Oh, but what about a second chance? The prison system is really gross and how we treat people with mental disorders is really, really terrible. We should really try to work on that.

...

Parent: So, I study neuroscience, and there is a high that you get from playing video games that are violent or video games where you have some sort of power. And that actually does become stronger the more you play the games, but some of the concepts of what guns really are in life, versus in a game, is very different from someone who may have an atypical development of the brain—where there is a much fuzzier line between the two—between reality and the games. Or, just wanting to feel that power and that high in real life, that they’re getting from the game. You can also get a high from learning.

Sully: Yeah, dopamine is a slippery little creature.

Parent: Dopamine, serotonin, there’s a lot to it. I don’t have any limits to the kinds of games that my son plays. I do ask him to tell me about them and explain what the games are about.

## ON GUNS AND MENTAL ILLNESS

Kaneo: I think people should have the right to own guns, and guns, in and of themselves, don’t make you commit crimes. There’s this misconception that we shouldn’t let people with mental illnesses have guns, but that’s actually flat out wrong. It’s actually a stereotype that people with mental illness are actually violent.

Sully: It’s just as likely for someone with mental illness to be homicidal as it is for someone without a mental illness. Although—that being said, mental illness does not necessarily cover “mentally sound.” I do think there are some people, who aren’t diagnosed with a mental illness, but are not stable enough to own a weapon.

...

Batman: Well there was that Fort Hood shooting—in Texas? Where that guy who was mentally unstable had a concealed weapon and shot a bunch of people? And it was the second time that it had happened at that SAME place? And it’s like, come on guys—you should not only have to have training but also a mental health test.

Geramy-kun: You should be one hundred per cent mentally healthy to have a gun.

Batman: Well, veterans should be able to have guns if they want them but not immediately, because PTSD is real.

Geramy-kun: Yeah, there should be extensive training and extensive background checks. It should be harder to own a gun license than a drivers license.

Velveteen: It’s so hard to get your driver’s license!

## ON GUNS AND LEGISLATION

Batman: The thing about the legislation though? Like the Second Amendment, which is the right to bear arms? I think

that's unfair, because the constitution was written in like the 1700s, or whatever? So, if people want to have guns, well, you can have the right to bear a musket!

Geramy-kun: Ha! The ones that take like an hour to load.

Batman: Yeah! That's totally chill! Because, back when they wrote that in the constitution, guns were not as dangerous as they are today.

Ponyboy: It's wasn't that guns were stupid and inaccurate and slow to reload, they were half-invaded by the British people and were constantly fearful.

Velveteen: So it was used to defend themselves.

Atti: Well it was a fledgling country. They needed a population with guns so that if they needed to draw upon people, they could do it.

Ponyboy: In the Second Amendment, they use the word militia. We have a very small amount of militias in the US right now—instead, now we have the US Army. And it proves the point that it was written a long time ago—

Velveteen: Because we don't need militias anymore

Jean-Luc: I think, also, back then a giant part of why they wanted to allow said arms was because all these people came from England, which is a very small country where everything was owned by the king, and you can't really just go hunting? And if you did, you'd likely be pulling a Robin Hood killing

some of the sheriff's deers or something? So, like in the United States, we have all this land that was "ours," and I think they wanted to have arms not only for defense but also to intimidate people and kill things.

...

Kaneo: I think there should be more gun control for the government than for citizens, because the government—they use guns explicitly to start wars and kill people, whereas normal people usually have guns for self-defense. And cops, they can use an alternative instead of using guns.

SwifTail: My mom does work in restorative justice, and we were having a similar conversation the other day, and she drew this line with her foot and said that on the left side there is a criminal with a gun and, sometimes, on the right side there is a criminal with a gun...and a badge.

Kaneo: I don't even think we should have cops. We should have peace officers. Cops only enforce laws and not all laws are good. It should actually be, I think, keeping peace is more important than enforcing laws, because most laws are actually victimless.

...

Jean-Luc: I feel like in general in the United States, when we argue over a point, there's never a good way to solve it, because, due to the way our country works, we cannot separate what is ideal and what can actually be done. We're so bogged down by so much legislation that it's so slow to change anything, yet we spend all our time arguing over like, we say, "In a world where blah blah blah was this way...."

But honestly, that's idealist versus realist. For instance, it's not realistic at all to take away all the guns from people. But people continue to fight on that point, a point that is just completely hopeless, and people stick to it because it's ideal. But honestly, people need to get rid of the ideal points and start thinking about what *could* happen.

Ponyboy: We *could* invent lightsabers, and that would completely drop the gun rate. And increase in the light saber rates.

Batman: I think science could do that at this point.

Ponyboy: Lightsabers and jet packs! Let's go!

SheCommander: Yeah, seriously. Where's my jet pack?

## ON GUNS AND SCHOOL SAFETY

*Does anyone know our school's policy around guns at school?*

Sully: No, I'm curious.

ChadWarden: Don't you get expelled? There's like a zero tolerance policy.

*Yeah, It's a level six [reads policy']*

SwifTail: That's a good rule.

Bob Ross: Yeah, but with the larger schools with budget cuts?

You rarely see anything enforced.

Kaneo: What about security guards?

Sully: Are you kidding me? Security guards? In a school? Does that not sound absolutely insane to anyone else?

ChadWarden: It's stupid and unnecessary.

Vivian: But it's pretty common.

Kaneo: Banning guns won't get rid of guns; and banning drugs isn't going to get rid of drugs. There's other problems, like upbringing.

ChadWarden: That's why we're opposed to security guards, because you're not actually solving the problem. It's sticking a little patch on it. Like, "Look all these kids are being crazy and violent: let's just have security guards to fight against them!" Instead of stopping kids from being violent in the first place by ensuring that they're brought up properly, like in non-abusive homes.

*Do you think that having the presence of security guards escalates the problem and elevates who has the power?*

Sully: Oh absolutely. And not to mention with teenagers rebelling against authority, and especially if you're already oppressed. I mean, you know, I can completely understand if you are already in some sort of situation where you're being oppressed, which is a really common reason why kids snap, why people snap in general, having this dude around, it's like,

it's still weird. Walking into a school and seeing a security guard is weird.

Bob Ross: I like it better though, than not even addressing the problem.

ChadWarden: There are better ways to address the problem though.

SwifTail: A lot of schools who have security guards don't just have them as an answer to a problem. They're there just in case you need someone when something happens in the moment, so they can stop it.

*A preventative measure, not a reactive one. All the schools I visited when I was teaching in New York, whether they were elementary schools or high schools, there was always a School Safety Officer at the main entrance, and every visitor has to sign in and check in with the office just like everyone has to sign in here.*

Bob Ross: That makes sense.

*And in almost all the high schools I visited, that check-in process also involved going through a metal detector.*

Vivian: Ohh, what??

Sully: Ugh.

*When you would walk into the school, it reminded me of walking into the police office.*

Bob Ross: An airport.

Sully: A prison.

*But would that make you feel safe if there was a real threat of weapons on campus, that everyone had to go through the metal detector?*

Bob Ross: No!

ChadWarden: No.

Sully: It makes you paranoid! And paranoia, as we all know, leads to hysteria and more aggression!

...

Sully: If you're a student, and you want to use a gun and have one that you use for game or sport or funsies or whatever stupid reason, you're not going to bring it to school. It's the same thing with weed or any other drug. If you're using drugs recreationally, you're not just gonna bring it to school and casually, "Whoops did I drop that on the floor on accident for the 7th time today?" You don't DO that unless you're like, "Pay attention to me please? Look at me I'm suffering. Take this from me—I'm suffering. This is a cry for help."

*With regards to suffering and being misunderstood, it makes me think of some of the stories behind the school shootings we hear about.*

Sully: Totally. Most shooters, after they've done their killing, turn the gun on themselves immediately.

And the suicide thing? I don't know the exact statistics, but I do know that there's a high number of queer kids who kill themselves. Because they're misunderstood and suffering greatly, because people treat them like garbage. And, like I said, when you get stepped on all your life, I can understand why murdering a bunch a people and then shooting yourself could happen. And this society is built and structured in a way that steps on a lot of people.

. . .

SwifTail: Gun violence is tied to a lot of different issues, and those things are tied into views and the legal system. Talking about guns is way more important than people think it is, because it leads to conversations about a lot of other problems that are completely related.

*Yeah, so far we've touched on mental illness, drugs, the prison industrial complex, racial profiling...*

Sully: Mm-hmm. Yeah, there's nothing inherently bad about having a gun. Nothing inherently bad about knowing how to shoot a gun. And nothing inherently bad about having fun shooting cans or even hunting. It's where you have the gun, how you access it, who can access the gun; it's how people react around guns and treat the idea of guns that is dangerous. And obviously the gun itself is dangerous—cuz that thing can still kill people.

*At first I felt nervous about bringing this topic up. I was like, "guns" and "teens" in the same sentence is just too scary. I wondered if someone might say something to me about it? But what I've come to be aware of is how much fear can*

*control or color the way one thinks about a topic, so that it is never even approached? And I'm so blown away by you guys, your willingness to take any topic head on and talk about difficult and sensitive topics.*

SwifTail: It's really important. I'm happy that you let us talk about this. It's really important.

Sully: Yeah, I'm glad that the conversation was started, even at this small scale.

. . .

1. "Possession of a gun, including but not limited to a firearm which is, "designed to or may readily be made to expel a projectile by the action of an explosive and any explosive, incendiary, or poison gas" (Section 921 of Title 18 of the U.S. Code). "Possession" is defined to include, but limited to having a weapon located: (1) a space assigned to a student as in a locker or a desk, (2) on the student's person or property (on the student's body, on the student's clothing, in an automobile, (3) under the student's control, or accessible or available; for example, hidden on school property. Confiscated guns are turned over to the police. Any occurrence is a Level 6 Disciplinary Action Level and results in Mandatory One Year Expulsion. (School's Discipline and Behavior Policy, 2013–14, in accordance with Portland Public School Board Policy on Weapons, Explosives and Fire Bombs).



Comparative map of Australia and America.<sup>1</sup>

## Australia vs. America

**Gemma-Rose  
Turnbull**

I grew up in a small Australian town in the subtropics. It was verdant, lush, nestled in the caldera of an extinct volcano. A caldera is, incidentally, an excellent place to shelter from nuclear fallout. And it certainly was, with its small town population of hippies, banana farmers, and Hari Krishnas, a good place to shelter from the world. We were happy, free ranging through the bush, coming to terms with all the things that kids in small towns have to: boredom, isolation, sex, drugs, the lack of jobs. The prevalence of marijuana, grown in the rampant green lushness, certainly didn't contribute to a robust legal economy—our education and employment opportunities were far drier than the landscape. But, for the most part, life was good.

In 1996, though, when I was in High School there was a period of time more like weeks than months, when five or six of my schoolmates, parents died. It was such an intense period of death for our small, close-knit group that we were gathered together for a sincere speech of condolence and offered counseling. It's a very long time ago now, but I can clearly picture how shaken we felt, sitting legs-crossed on the wooden floor



surrounded by friends in varying degrees of shock and sorrow. We leaned on each other while we watched the shaky-voiced teacher struggle to find comforting words for us.

The deaths included a couple of heart attacks, cancer (of course), and two parents who had killed themselves.<sup>2</sup> The suicides were the most shocking of these deaths. Our only previous experiences of suicide had been with a sad kid in the year ahead of us who'd driven himself to a quiet spot and tied a rope to a tree; and another kid a few years earlier who'd lost his mind on psychedelics and killed himself with a kitchen knife. From where we sat, suicide seemed the providence of sad kids and mad kids, and unfathomable in the context of grown-up life.

I was too frightened, too unsure of how to talk about things like death and mental health, to ever ask how they'd died exactly, but friends-of-friends circulated fragments of words that filled in the pieces: *oven*, *train*, *overdose*. The rumours were bigger than the reality of course, but the one word never mentioned was *gun*. Because it wasn't a word that was part of our lexicon. The only folks who had guns where we came from were farmers, whose holey, flannel shirts and work-roughened hands betrayed their deep connection to earth and practicality—something that seemed the antithesis of the kind of mad-sadness that led to facing down a barrel.<sup>3</sup>

I'm thirty-four now, and I have never seen a gun except in passing while holstered on the hip of a cop. I know more about mental health now, probably far more intimately than I ever thought possible, and I know about death, again, more than I thought I would, but I don't know about guns. Funnily enough for someone writing about guns, I don't actually *want* to know about them. They scare me. And it seems so simple to me; people with guns kill people. Aka, *guns mean death*.

What seems less simple is the issue of mental health, and the intersection where it meets with gun culture. Because this topic is not just about shooting suicides, it also encompasses the mental health of people who use guns against other people. Most significantly, this includes the perpetrators of mass shootings, those horrifying moments seized on by media to further delineate them as the dominion of the “crazy,” which then become flash points for demands to renegotiate gun ownership laws, *specifically for people with mental health problems*.<sup>4</sup> Certainly acute paranoia, delusions, and depression are common among mass killers<sup>5</sup>—but there is overwhelming evidence that the vast majority of people with psychiatric disorders do not commit violent acts.<sup>6</sup> In fact, only about four per cent of violence in the United States can be attributed to people with mental illness.<sup>7</sup> But “crazy” is sensational.



Martin Bryant, source: News Limited.<sup>8</sup>

And of course, I'm fond of telling people in America that in 1996, the same year my classmates parents died in droves, the (then) extremely conservative Prime Minister of Australia implemented strident personal gun ownership laws and a gun buyback scheme after the *only* massacre we ever had. This is, in equal measure, true and false. Of course, there is more than one massacre in Australian history, particularly when you take into account the atrocities perpetrated against Aboriginal Australians by white settlers. But the one in the Tasmanian town of Port Arthur, where thirty-five people were killed and a further twenty-three injured by twenty-nine-year-old Martin Bryant,<sup>9</sup> was not just the deadliest mass shooting in Australian history, but one of the deadliest in the world.<sup>10</sup> And it was perpetrated by a man who had a long and complicated history of mental health problems.<sup>11</sup>

The National Firearms Agreement (NFA)<sup>12</sup> was introduced in 1996, removing semi-automatic, pump-action shotguns and rifles from civilian possession, and was overwhelmingly popular; more than 640,000 guns were surrendered nationwide,<sup>13</sup> driven by a country of people terrified into a new understanding of the danger of liberal licensing laws. In the wake of the tragedy, polls showed public support for these measures at upwards of ninety per cent.<sup>14</sup> It is now almost twenty years since Bryant's killing spree, and rates of (now illegal) gun ownership are presumed to have returned to the levels pre-Port Arthur.<sup>15</sup> <sup>16</sup> But in the eighteen years before the NFA, there were thirteen mass shootings in Australia, and *none* in the eighteen years after.<sup>17</sup>

Of course I feel smug when I share this story, like somehow my big, mostly sunburnt country of few people has achieved something great, unburdening its citizens of the anxiety that they could be killed anywhere at any time. There

are still knives and fists, and our battalion of deadly creatures to contend with, but they all seem so comparatively ingrained into our cultural psyche that they can be lumped into a "She'll be right, mate. No worries" category. Though the pre- and post-NFA rates are impressive, arguably more interesting are the accelerated declines in firearm deaths, particularly suicide.<sup>18</sup>

Because when you look at the statistics of death by gun, it is not the mass shootings or homicides that sway the favour of the numbers—SUICIDE BY GUN IS THE PRIMARY CAUSE OF GUN DEATH IN BOTH AMERICA AND AUSTRALIA. In 2010 Australia had a population of 22-odd million.<sup>19</sup> In 2011 America had 311-odd million.<sup>20</sup> Statistically the total numbers of gun deaths (which include accident, homicide, and suicide) were 1.06 per 100,000 in Australia (in 2010), and 10.3 per 100,000 in America (2011).<sup>21</sup> In itself that seems like a significant divide, but when you look at the total number per population the figures are astonishing: Approximately 233 for Australia, and 32,033 for America. In *one* year. But, for comparisons sake, what does that mean for suicide by shooting rates? Well, in Australia, gun suicide accounted for 0.73 per 100,000; so of the 233 deaths, 170 were suicide. In America, the rates were 6.3 per 100,000; so of the 32,033 deaths 19,593 were suicide.

Let me repeat: SUICIDE BY GUN IS THE *PRIMARY* CAUSE OF GUN DEATH IN BOTH AMERICA *and* AUSTRALIA. In 2010 in Australia, 170 OF 233 GUN DEATHS WERE SUICIDE. In America in 2011, 19,593 OF 32,033 GUN DEATHS WERE SUICIDE.

Finding these statistics was so astonishing to me that I have relayed them to everyone I have come across since:

colleagues, friends, my flatmates watching TV. Americans from all over the country, who laughed at my earnest interruption of their show, exclaimed their own genuine surprise and paused in a moment of reflection. My mate visiting from Australia—whose sixteen-year-old face I recall as white with horror after his Dad's suicide (an image that will be forever burned into my memory)—sits at a bar with me as we talk gently about the wounds of so long ago. He too is genuinely surprised, but the moment of his reflection carries so much more weight. Almost twenty years after we sat together in that hall, we find ourselves still leaning into each other for comfort. Suicide really does reach its arms far past the moment it is enacted.

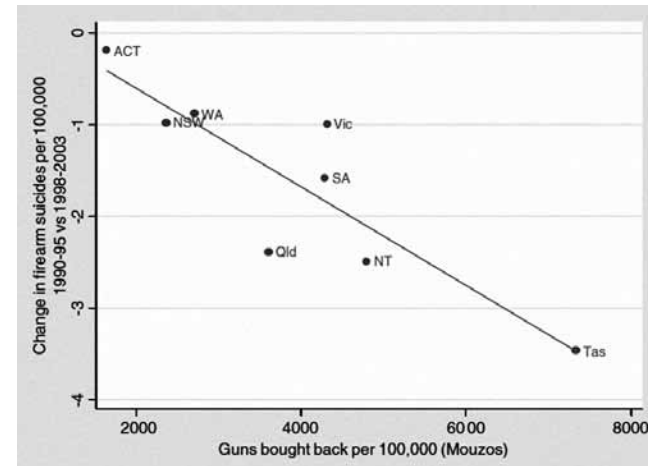
I've spent a fair bit of time in America since the sunny coloured days of my childhood in Australia. And the casualness of the gun culture here scares me. As an outsider, it seems there is a heightened level of anxiety in this country, not because of guns exactly, but as a symptom of the "every man for himself" mentality that appears to be so pervasive here. And, of course, I question the mental state of this nation which values the right to bear arms above the lives of its citizens—in a sane world how can the vehement defence of guns continue after little kids are shot to death en masse in their schoolroom?<sup>22</sup> But when you break it down statistically, I am far more likely to kill myself with a gun than to be killed by one wielded by someone else.

So, if we return to the National Firearms Agreement in Australia, perhaps the most interesting questions that arise are not those that relate to mass shootings (the reason for implementing the NFA), but how the criminalization of gun ownership has affected the rates of shooting suicide; and, secondary to this, whether other options of suicide would be taken up to replace gun death? Arguably, it is only here

that we can posit some anti-gun rhetoric, if there is some proof that getting rid of guns reduces the suicide rate.

In 1996 in Australia, the annual rate of firearm suicide was 2.09 people per 100,000. In that year it accounted for 382 deaths.<sup>23</sup> In 2011 it had dropped to 0.62 people per 100,000 and accounted for a total of 135 deaths which means a decreased rate of firearm suicide by about 65%. I'm no statistician, but if we applied that reduction to the 2011 statistics for gun suicide in America, it would take us from approximately 19,593 deaths to roughly 6,924 deaths. A reduction that feels almost as hard to fathom as the original numbers.

The buyback scheme implementation varied from state to state. In states with quick buybacks, the fall in the suicide rate far exceeded the rate fall in states with slower buybacks. Tasmania did a quicker buyback and saw a larger decline in suicides, while the Australian Capital Territory did a slower buyback and a slower decline:<sup>24</sup>



Graph: Leigh Andrew, Neill Christine.<sup>25</sup>

But the key question in this somewhat nonsensical calculating is, whether other methods of suicide replaced shooting? It's a trickier question to answer than it might seem. Though guns are not the most common method by which people attempt suicide, they are the most lethal. About eighty-five per cent of suicide attempts with a firearm end in death. (Drug overdose, the most widely used method in suicide attempts, is fatal in less than three per cent of cases.)<sup>26</sup> One rationale for why gun control *could* reduce death rates looks at the influence of impulsivity—suicides are not typically long-planned deeds. While they certainly can be, evidence suggests that they most often occur in a moment of brief but heightened vulnerability.<sup>27</sup> In fact, nine out of ten people who survive an attempted suicide, do *not* go on to die by suicide.

But, another layer to all of these complicated factors is how we classify death, specifically, how we classify deaths as suicide. There is an ongoing debate in Australia on whether the number of suicides is accurate or whether it is seriously under-reported, therefore, hiding the actual numbers of self-inflicted deaths.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, sometimes the circumstances surrounding a death leaves doubt as to whether the person truly intended to commit suicide. These circumstances might include unobserved falls or accidental drowning, single vehicle accidents where a driver has crashed into a fixed object, hangings involving a possibility of autoeroticism, or incidents that call into question the capacity of the person to understand the seriousness of their action (for example, young children), and drug overdoses that may be accidental. To complicate matters, coroners may be reluctant or unable to label a death as suicide because it can be an extremely sensitive cultural and religious issue, or because assisted suicides may not be reported as such.<sup>29</sup>

Regardless, and taking account of all these complicating factors, a 2006 Australian study concluded that data does not support any "suicide method substitution hypothesis".<sup>30</sup> Basically, after the implementation of the National Firearms Agreement, the suicide rates in Australia dropped because other methods of suicide were not replacing gun death. It is almost impossible not to entwine my own personal politics into these findings; I so want them to be true. Because more substantial than any anti-gun argument against the relatively rare and random incidents of mass shooting (and the perpetrator's state of mental health), is the argument that taking guns away from people reduces the incidence of impulsive suicide. Of course, if someone is determined to take their own life, there are a myriad of ways in which to do so. But this reduction is the most convincing argument I can think of to argue against such liberal gun licensing laws.

Many years ago I had the chance to view Australian photographer Angela Blakely's powerful series on suicide, and it has stuck with me ever since—one of those visceral, emotive artworks that flashes before your eyes occasionally, years later, still evocative. In it, she interviewed the mothers of men and women who'd killed themselves, photographed where they had died, and in Daniel's case, she photographed a bullet he had handmade, identical to the one he had used to kill himself. His story sort of seems an iconic example of the difference between suicide in Australia and America. We still have guns despite the buyback scheme, and if you are determined to shoot yourself it is possible to make a bullet and do so. There are other options too; hanging, jumping, overdose, knives. And while I am certainly not anti-suicide per se, I do find a strange sort of comfort in knowing that if someone wants to kill themselves in Australia it *has* to be a more

considered action (of course there is another massive article to be written on the status of mental health support in both countries, and why someone might find themselves in a place where suicide seems the most viable option). It feels like it makes it easier to understand and accept that if the parents of my schoolmates made that unfathomable decision to leave them for the respite of death, at least they really couldn't see another way.



Daniel: Male, 27 years old, locked the door downstairs and shot himself with his own handmade bullet on the 10th of November 1996.<sup>31</sup>

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## **Mama Didn't Raise a Victim**

### **Amanda Evans**

My mother Cindy is the kindest, most compassionate person I know. She is constantly doing things to help out people in her community, especially things no one else wants to do. Even as we spoke over the phone for this interview, she was at a friend's house caring for a woman our family has watched slowly die from a rare, degenerative disease. My mom has been keeping that woman company at least twice a week for over a year-and-a-half.

Politics were not discussed much in my house when I was growing up. It was not until I left the house for college that my mom started becoming very involved with the Tea Party. My mom's political convictions are a new part of her I am just beginning to discover. I mention this because it provides a context for the political views she expresses in our conversation. She is in no way an advocate for violence but she does have very strong views on her rights as an American citizen. Her opinions are expressed in a conversation from April 18, 2014, transcribed below:

AMANDA: I am working with some people on a project about guns, and my portion of the project is on self-defense. I'd like to share a portion of our conversation with the project. Because I know that you own a gun, I was wondering what you had to say about self-defense. Is your owning of a gun tied to self-defense?

CINDY: Yes, it's tied to self-defense. It's tied to the right to have a gun. This is a very political conversation.

A: That's okay, I think it's good to bring in all types of voices into the conversation.

C: Yeah, and it might open people's eyes. Okay, well take for instance a circumstance where we needed to defend ourselves against a tyrannical government. It's happened in other countries before—think of WWII. The reason why the Declaration of Independence and the amendments exist is to protect the American citizen against a tyrannical government—whether it's another government or our own. Right now we are seeing circumstances like this come up all the time. I don't know if you're familiar with this situation that happened in Nevada this last week, are you?

A: No, I don't think so.

C: You can research the specifics, but this cattle rancher named Cliven Bundy lives on a ranch his family has owned for centuries. He was supposed to pay taxes on the property, and he didn't, because he felt like he shouldn't have to pay the government for something he already owned. Anyway, the Bureau of Land Management came in and started taking his cattle away. They had SWAT team type equipment, tanks that were bullet proof, and everything. He and some other people stood up and said, "No, you're not going to take away our property." They felt like the government was taking too many liberties and had too much power. People showed up who didn't even know him to help him defend his property and the BLM pulled out.

A: Just because he didn't pay taxes?

C: Right. The people who defended the land basically said, "It's not right, the government should never threaten the American people." The citizens came out on horseback and



Poster published by the National Association for Gun Rights, 2012<sup>1</sup>

stood their ground. On the way out the BLM shot a bunch of cattle and water tanks, you know the Bully Pulpit type of thing. That's exactly why American citizens should have the ability to stand up against their government.

Also, sure there are horrible circumstances like Columbine or the Newtown, but when you don't have someone there who can take the shooter down, then it becomes much worse. It's like that on the Army bases. They now have it so the Army can't be armed on their own bases, and because no one is armed, they can't defend themselves.

So, the Second Amendment is written specifically for that. "A well regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed." Most people are law-abiding citizens with guns, and that right should not be infringed.



A: You know, I was doing research about guns and self-defense, and it seemed like a lot of guns right now are being marketed to women as a way for women to defend themselves and their home from intruders. I thought that was interesting because I didn't realize the marketing for self-defense had been so targeted on women recently.

C: Yes, when we go into a gun store we see a lot of things that are specifically made for women's self-defense. There are a lot of guns with pink camouflage on them that are made a little smaller to fit a woman's hand. But think about it, if you had some guy coming at you to attack you, you would need to be able to defend yourself against him. Can you imagine if someone came into your house, where their only reason for coming in is to do harm, and you couldn't defend yourself because the government didn't allow you to own a gun? If we abolish guns only law-abiding citizens will be unarmed. That's just what happens. Criminals will go into the black market and acquire them. If the government confiscates guns, do you think criminals will turn in unregistered guns? No. Then we're all going to be defenseless against the criminals.

A: Yeah, I could see why you'd think that, because there are so many guns in America.

C: You know, take Switzerland for example. Their crime rate is extremely low because everyone is armed. People aren't going to take the chance to go into someone's house because they absolutely know everyone is armed. And in Israel you see women walking down the street with AK-47s on their shoulders. That's just how life is, because they have to be able to defend themselves.

A: The political climate is very different in Israel than it is in America.

C: Yes, they have a different set of problems there than we have. In Australia and Canada, they are having problems because all of the guns have been confiscated. They have so much more crime and the people are defenseless. If we had to call the police to come to our house because someone was breaking in, how long do you think it would take them to get here?

A: I guess it would probably take a while since we live deep down a private dirt road in a rural area. Our address on MapQuest doesn't show up right.

C: Right, it would take them a long time to get here. If someone tried to hurt us, we'd be dead by the time the police got here. Your dad and I shoot recreationally at a range, but I hope to God I never have to use it on a person. I hope to God I never ever, ever, ever do. But I want a gun if ever, God forbid, I am in a situation where I need it.

A: That makes sense.

C: I'm just an average person, but you know that I follow politics very closely. The political climate is so polarized at the moment. At the beginning of his presidency, Obama promised to bring everyone together, but now we are more divided than ever. But, when he came into office, he said he was going to transform this country and he's doing it. There's a whole bunch of stuff that goes with that, but they are overstepping their bounds. They had a 1.6 billion round purchase by

Homeland Security, then another bullet purchase for the Post Office, then another for the IRS. Why do those departments need those bullets? What are they planning on doing with those? It does not make sense that they are purchasing ammunition like that. For the tax agency? For the post office? That is exactly why we aren't going to give up our gun rights. If they are going to be armed, we should be able to be armed. What choice does that leave us but to defend this right of ours?

A: It seems like your lifestyle in a rural area offers a really different perspective on this than the lifestyle I live in an urban area, in Los Angeles.

C: Probably. Part of the reason for that is that you have a lot of people around. There are a lot more police stations and there are people around, neighbors who could help you. Hopefully they would help you—although the American public is getting stupid about stuff lately. That's the false sense of security you get from living in an urban area. You assume crimes won't be committed out in the open, but the crime rate in your area is probably a lot higher.

A: Well there's a lot more people here. The city I live in has 600,000 people in it. Where you live you don't even have to lock your car. My car was stolen near my house just a few months ago.

C: Right, well I think the misconception with people who don't agree with gun laws is that they aren't necessary. How many law-abiding citizens own guns? You never hear about people who own guns and are responsible, harming no one. You only hear about criminal acts where guns

are abused. Just because there are some people who commit crimes, you don't punish everyone. You wouldn't take cars away from everyone just because people get in car accidents. It's our right to own them. We need guns in the event that we need to defend ourselves.

It's not the average American citizen, it's not the Tea Partiers, it's not conservative people who are going out there and committing the crimes. There may be a few, I'm not saying they're completely blameless, but they are not the people that are committing crimes regularly. But, more often than not, those law-abiding people are the ones who are buying guns. If you research any of the crimes committed, they are usually not committed by conservatives. That's a point that needs to be made.

People think conservatives are weird nut jobs. Harry Reid called Tea Partiers like me terrorists. To me, it's the government that's acting more like a terrorist. If the government has 1.6 billion bullets for each department, then American citizens need to have guns. In the long run, we don't have a chance anyway since they have bulletproof vests and advanced weapons. They have bombproof tanks. They'll come in and spray us down. We'll be damned if they take our guns away. They'll get us in the end, but we'll be damned if they take it away from us.

A: Hopefully that doesn't happen.

C: Hopefully it doesn't.

1. <http://www.nationalgunrights.org>

## **Guns Don't Kill People, Mistaking the Relevance of Proximate Causation Does.**

**Zachary Gough**

Everyone from Michael Moore to Rush Limbaugh has a catchy twist on the NRA's slogan "Guns don't kill people, people kill people," to make an argument about who/what is to blame for gun violence in the USA. Whether right or left, it has almost become mandatory to make a variation on the saying to make your point. Here are some of my favorites:

*Guns don't kill people, Ink kills people<sup>1</sup>*

*Guns don't kill people, Gun culture does<sup>2</sup>*

*Guns don't kill people, Gun control laws kill people<sup>3</sup>*

*Guns don't kill people, Liberalism does<sup>4</sup>*

*Guns don't kill people, Children do<sup>5</sup>*

*Guns don't kill people, The Media Kills people<sup>6</sup>*

*Guns don't kill people, Video games do<sup>7</sup>*

*Guns don't kill people, Dumbasses do<sup>8</sup>*

*Guns don't kill people, Americans Kill People<sup>9</sup>*

This statement, manipulated in any way you like, removes the focus from guns to some other factor at play in gun-related violence. But if we're talking about causation, does it make sense to totally remove guns from the equation? Surely these situations are much more complex than pointing the finger of blame at a gun or at something else.

The most useful and informative perspective I've come across in my research is from Dr. David Kyle Johnson, an associate professor at King's College in Pennsylvania, in his blog "A Logical Take" in which he tackles the statement from a logician's standpoint, articulating the difference between ultimate, intermediate, and proximate causes.<sup>10</sup> These terms can help us speak about situations of gun violence with more accuracy and complexity.

First, Johnson points out that no logical conclusion follows the statement. *Guns don't kill people, people kill people*, and therefore...what? There should be no gun regulation at all? All people should have their fingers chopped off? It has no conclusion. Johnson states that without an obvious conclusion, it isn't an argument at all, so no conclusion about gun regulation follows.

Then Johnson defines the difference between ultimate, intermediate, and proximate causation:

*Consider the words you are looking at right now. What "caused" the words to appear as they are appearing to you right now? You might say that I, the author, did—but that is not the whole story. The whole story is long and includes my fingers typing on a keyboard, the creation of an MSWord document, me posting the words on my blog, etc. There is a long "causal chain" standing between my intention to type these words and the emission of light from your screen to your eyes. The causal chain starts with me—I am the ultimate cause. Other subsequent links in the chain—my typing, Justin's postings, your clicking—are intermediate causes. And the light emitting from your screen is the proximate cause—the thing or event most immediately responsible for your current experience.*

The argument suggests, Johnson states, that people are the ultimate cause, whereas guns are merely proximate causes when it comes to murders and gun violence, and that the proximate cause is just the last in a long chain of intermediate causes. But pointing out that guns are merely the proximate cause to a murder, as our statement does, is totally irrelevant to the issue. Johnson uses two examples of different proximate

causes of death to make his point: *Bazookas don't kill people, people kill people*, and *Cars don't kill people, people kill people*. Bazookas clearly should not be legal, as they're designed exclusively for mass murder, and cars probably should remain legal because they're useful for all kinds of things even though they are often the proximate cause of death. In either case, their status as proximate cause is irrelevant to whether they should be regulated and to what degree.

Thus, the argument "stop blaming the guns and start blaming the person because guns are only proximate causes" is guilty of the fallacy of "mistaking the relevance of proximate causation."

So, the next time someone quotes the NRA slogan, "Guns don't kill people, people kill people," in an attempt to end a discussion about gun control, do me a favor; point out that they have *mistaken the relevance of proximate causation*, pause briefly to enjoy the confused look on their face, and then patiently explain the fallacy to them.

1. David E Petzel. <http://www.fieldandstream.com/blogs/gun-nuts/2014/03/guns-dont-kill-people-ink-kills-people>

2. Charles Kenney <http://www.businessweek.com/articles/2013-01-13/guns-dont-kill-people-gun-culture-does>

3. Chuck Baldwin <http://www.renewamerica.com/columns/baldwin/130921>

4. Rush Limbaugh <http://www.msnbc.com/the-last-word/rush-guns-dont-kill-people-liberalism-does>

5. defillipps <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2013/10/08/1245304/-Debunking-the-Guns-Dont-Kill-People-People-Kill-People-Myth>

6. Edward Powell <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EoXf-VvNv8c>

7. Oliver Willis <http://mediamatters.org/blog/2013/09/17/media-figures-say-guns-dont-kill-people-video-g/195921>

8. <http://www.mediapost.com/publications/article/219699/guns-dont-kill-people-dumbasses-do.html>

9. Michael Moore <http://www.michaelmoore.com/words/mike-friends-blog/its-guns-we-all-know-its-not-really-guns>

10. Johnson, David Kyle. "A Logical Take." *"Guns Don't Kill People, People Do?"* Psychology Today, 12 Feb. 2013. Web. <<http://www.psychologytoday.com/>

## **Guns and the Border**

**Patricia Vazquez**

**Los Estados Unidos  
ponen las armas,  
en México ponemos  
los muertos.**

**(The United States provides the  
guns, in Mexico we provide the dead)**

Image, Patricia Vazquez

Mexico is experiencing a surge in gun-related violence since 2006. Yet Mexico does not manufacture small arms, light weapons, or ammunition in sizeable quantities. Moreover, Mexico has some of the most restrictive gun legislation in the world. It is assumed that a considerable proportion of weapons in Mexico are illegal, most having been trafficked from the United States.

*A significant proportion of US firearm dealers are dependent on Mexican demand: 46.7% of Federal Firearms Licenses to sell small arms during 2010–2012 depended for their economic existence on some amount of demand from the US-Mexico trade to stay in business.*

*A sizeable and growing percentage of US firearms sales are destined for Mexico: 2.2% of US domestic arm sales are attributable to the US-Mexico traffic.*

*The volume of firearms crossing the US-Mexican border is higher than previously assumed: 253,000 firearms were purchased annually to be trafficked over 2010–2012.*

*The value of firearms sales destined for Mexico are significant and growing appreciably: the trade represented annual revenues of \$127.2 million for the US firearms industry during 2010–2012.*

*The US and Mexican authorities are seizing a comparatively small number of firearms at the border: Based on seizure reports for 2009, US and Mexican authorities in recent years have been*

*seizing just 14.7% of total arms bought with the intention of trafficking them.<sup>1</sup>*

### *Operation Fast and Furious*

From 2009–2011, under Operation Fast and Furious, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) Phoenix Field Division, along with other partners, allowed illegal gun sales, believed to be destined for Mexican drug cartels, in order to track the sellers and purchasers. Of the 2000 weapons involved, an estimated 1,400 were lost by the ATF in Mexico. Authorities say the crime ring was believed to have supplied the Sinaloa cartel with guns. Mexico's drug cartels often seek out guns in the US because gun laws in Mexico are more restrictive than in the US.

Some guns purchased by the ring were later found at crime scenes in Mexico and the United States. Two of the missing weapons linked to the operation turned up at the Arizona murder scene of United States Border Patrol agent Brian Terry.<sup>2</sup> His family sued the federal government for 25 Million USD for wrongful death, claiming they should have known it created a risk to law enforcement authorities and that the firearms agents should have known their actions would lead to injuries and deaths to civilians and police officers in America and Mexico.

In 2011, whistle-blowing leads to a congressional investigation by the Senate Judiciary Committee and the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, and as a result of this investigation Attorney General Eric Holder is cited for contempt. Holder testifies before the Senate Judiciary Committee that, "this operation was flawed in concept, as well as in execution."<sup>3</sup> ATF Deputy Director

William Hoover resigns in 2012 as a result of a Congressional report, laying blame on him and Acting ATF Director Kenneth Melson. The operation lasted approximately fifteen months, resulting in grand jury indictments of thirty-four suspects in drug and firearms trafficking organizations.<sup>4</sup>



Image, Patricia Vazquez

1. The Way of the Gun: Estimating Firearms Traffic across the U.S-Mexico border. McDougal, Topher; Shirk, David A; Muggah, Robert and Patterson, John A. University of San Diego Transborder Institute and Igarapé Institute.
2. "Operation Fast and Furious Fast Facts.com." *CNN*. N.p., 27 Aug. 2013. Web. <<http://www.cnn.com/2013/08/27/world/americas/operation-fast-and-furious-fast-facts>>.
3. United States House of Representatives Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, and United States Senate Committee on the Judiciary. *Fast and Furious: The Anatomy of a Failed Operation*. 112th Congress, 2012. Web. <<http://oversight.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/7-31-12-FF-Part-I-FINAL-REPORT.pdf>>.
4. Billeaud, Jacques. "Fast And Furious Lawsuit: Family Of Slain Border Patrol Agent Brian Terry Sues Federal Government." *The Huffington Post*. HPMG News, 14 Dec. 2012. Web. <[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/12/14/fast-and-furious-lawsuit\\_n\\_2303789.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/12/14/fast-and-furious-lawsuit_n_2303789.html)>.

## Interview with Border and Customs Official

**Betty Marín**

The son of a family friend agreed to be interviewed about his work as a Border and Customs Enforcement Official on the border of American and Mexico and how it relates to guns. He chose to remain anonymous.

BETTY: How long have you been working with the Border Patrol?

ANONYMOUS: Since April 2011. Three years in a few days.

B: What is your position?

A: Customs Enforcement and Border Protection Officer. CEBPO. It's a little different than Border Patrol. Border Patrol are the guys in green that are out in the desert. I am at the border, if you're coming back through Tijuana and you meet an officer, that's me. Or when you go on an international flight, and you come in through an airport, go through Immigrations and Customs, that's us.

B: Where did you start doing this work?

A: In San Isidro [CA].

B: How long were you there?

A: I was transferred February of this year so...I was there two months short of three years. So two years, ten months.

B: Then you got switched to LA?

A: Yeah, LAX.



B: Now you receive people who have come off of an international flight?

A: Correct.

B: You process them, where they show their passport and all of that?

A: Exactly.

B: What was the work like when you were in San Isidro? You were literally on the border.

A: Yeah, I was on the border, checking cars, people, pedestrians walking through. The last part I was in, I was on the other side making sure people weren't bringing in anything prohibitive. A little bit of everything. The only thing I haven't been a part of is cargo; I don't do cargo. That's something else we do. It's a lot more physical down there. You're standing basically your entire shift, checking cars, that sort of thing. It's a little different than the airport. The airport is more of a desk job.

B: What was a typical day like when you were in San Isidro?

A: Pretty much out in the field, like I said, checking cars. People who were coming back from vacation or everyday travelers who work either in the US or Mexico. Checking documents, customs, of course drugs are the big thing right now. Between Tijuana and San Diego is a big crossing for drugs. Probably one of the biggest things we're looking for.

B: How often did you actually encounter drugs?

A: Did I find drugs?

B: Yes.

A: Myself, two [times].

B: In your three years of work, you found drugs twice?

A: Small amounts here and there, but big loads that were actual trafficking, just two.

B: There's cars passing through all the day, so it's probably pretty busy.

A: It's the busiest land border in the world. I don't know the figures off hand, but if you looked you would see the millions of cars and people that cross every year. Very busy.

B: What was it like for you to do that work? Interesting, boring, exciting?

A: There are good days and bad days. I mean a lot of it was repetitious. If you think about it, ninety-nine percent of the people who are crossing the border are everyday people, workers, or people who will come over for shopping. So that can get a little repetitious and boring. But when you do get something, I'm not going to lie, I do like the action. I do like the excitement that came from San Isidro. The one percent of people who were trying to break the law did make it exciting. Almost everyday you would find something weird, something interesting that would catch your eye.

B: What was one of those things?

A: Probably the craziest thing that happened was that someone threw a Molotov cocktail at one of the officers. We were processing, and all of a sudden you just see a big ball of flames. We all looked and saw a bunch of officers drawing their gun on a person. Not something you see everyday. It keeps you...I like the excitement I guess.

B: What drew you to this work?

A: I worked as a warehouse supervisor before this, and I would always see Customs and Border Enforcement coming because we were an international warehouse. I started talking to them and asking them how the job was. My dad was a longshoreman and he would always see them there too. I thought, you know, a government job, thinking I was going to be like them at a cargo facility at the docks in Long Beach, because I live by there. But they offered me San Diego and I took it. Completely different than what I thought, but I ended up liking it.

B: You expected to be dealing with commercial cargo stuff?

A: When I applied I thought that's what I was signing myself up for. When I applied I didn't apply the correct way, for the correct location, that's why they offered me San Diego.

B: So it's been different because it's less commercial cargo, and more immigration issues?

A: It's more geared towards immigration than I thought it would be.

B: How has it been to deal with immigration issues?

A: Good and bad. Some of the hardest things have been telling someone they can't see their father in his last days. When I was in San Isidro, people were coming over for humanitarian reasons, and you had to turn them away. They couldn't come in because of previous problems or whatever the reasons. That's a hard thing. Sometimes people are smiling because they waited years and they finally got their papers. The hardest part is telling people they can't see their immediate relatives before they die. It comes with the job.

B: That must be hard. The majority of people you are dealing are either going back and forth or coming to work or to be with family, and also there is the drug issue.

A: San Isidro one of the biggest points for drugs.

B: What about guns? How much are you looking out for illegal weapons?

A: That would be more going into Mexico. The majority of the guns, weapons, and ammunition that Mexico and the cartels have are from the US. So that's when you deal with illegal weapons. Once in a while you get someone who is coming over who went hunting, or they forgot that they had a weapon in their car. That sort of thing. It's not very common, but it happens. Illegal wise, it's going outbound.

B: That was part of the work you were doing as well?

A: A little bit. Just for a short time.

B: Did you encounter weapons?

A: Myself, personally, no. Weapons going to Mexico, no. I had a guy once who had a gun that he forgot he had; it was just a mistake.

B: Is that something you were trained to look out for? Weapons?( Knowing that a lot of the weapons that are going to cartels are coming from the US.)

A: Yeah. Contraband from the US.

B: So you're basically trained to look out for guns, drugs, and people entering illegally?

A: Yup.

B: You're probably also trained to use guns. Do you have to carry a gun at all times?

A: We are authorized to carry it 24/7. You don't have to, but you do have to carry one at work.

B: You can use them 24/7 but you don't have to.

A: When you're working, yes, but as far as your personal life, you don't have to.

B: What have you chosen to do?

A: I just wear it occasionally. I actually hardly ever wear it when I'm off duty.

B: Did you have experience with guns before you started this work?

A: I had never fired a gun before in my life.

B: So the first time you shot one was in training?

A: Yeah, right before we went to the academy, we had a training with the Firearms Department. And then when we went to the academy, we had hours and hours of training. We're at the academy almost four months, and almost every other day you're shooting for an hour or two.

B: What was it like to learn how to use a gun and shoot it?

A: To be honest, it's fun. It is fun training with it. I enjoyed going to the range. In order to respect the weapon, you know. I'm not scared of it. It kind of brought that out of me. I'm not afraid to handle it like some other people who have never touched a weapon in their life. My wife is terrified of it. I try to show her little things. I loaded it and let her touch it. Just so that she sees it. She's just scared of it because she doesn't know what it is. She thinks it's going to go off on its own. Just like in the movies. Just learn to respect the gun.

B: Have you had to use it in your work?

A: No. It's rare that we even shoot. I've used it as far as taken it out, but not to shoot.

B: It's a bit controversial this fact that the majority of guns that end up in cartel hands are coming from the US, but in the US it's so hard to pass any legislation that is restricting how people get guns. So I'm wondering if, as a person who works for the US government, is it something you talk about in your workplace? Do you talk about the policy, or are you just allowed to believe what you want?

A: Like pro-gun or anti-gun?

B: Yeah, kind of.

A: We're just focused on what is crossing or entering the US. In terms of policy, it's not something we talk about professionally. Personally, I know people at work who are gun collectors. That's one of their hobbies. I think they had that before they even entered this job. I don't think it has anything to do with the job. It's the way they were brought up. Like I said, I never shot a gun before this job, and I don't own any other guns, so I just think it is the way you were raised, who you are personally. But as far as the job, the only thing we're worried about is whether it is illegal, coming in or going out.

B: It's not common then for you to talk about gun policy at work or that your supervisors tell you to have a particular opinion about it?

A: No, not at all. Like I said, some gun collectors will talk about their guns, but since I'm not one, I don't talk about it.

# Listen to the Internet: Guns and Race

Sharita Towne

↑ 0  
↓

**Guns and Race: What is the relationship?**  
(self.AskReddit)  
submitted 1 month ago by xaxa29  
[removed]  
13 comments share

all 13 comments

sorted by: **best** ▼

↑ [-] **rileymanrr** 2 points 1 month ago  
↓ I dunno, get some facts on firearm ownership demographics.  
permalink

↑ [-] **prophane33** 1 point 1 month ago  
↓ Probably bad.  
permalink

↑ [-] **psycho\_admin** 1 point 1 month ago  
↓ Anyone else getting the felling this is a shitty attempt at trolling?  
permalink

↑ [-] **xaxa29** [S] 1 point 1 month ago  
↓ I don't mean for it to be a shitty attempt at trolling. I'm curious, how people might react to this question based on their own experiences, things they've heard, read, or seen. I ask folks around me, but I am interested in asking on the internet. I think people will share differently, and I am interested in that!  
permalink parent

↑ [-] **psycho\_admin** 1 point 1 month ago  
↓ Yeah that's why you posted using a brand new account that has no post history and left the question incredible open ended while touching on two hot topics.  
permalink parent

↑ [-] **xaxa29** [S] 0 points 1 month ago  
↓ Do you find that frustrating? Yes, I've never used reddit before. Do you think I should narrow the question down? Or do you think this is an inappropriate type of question for this site?  
permalink parent

- ↑ [-] **psycho\_admin** 1 point 1 month ago  
 ↓ No troll, I don't find it frustrating. I find it funny watching people like you try to troll and fail. Its like watching a bully try to chase a victim but instead trips and falls.  
[permalink](#) [parent](#)
- ↑ [-] **xaxa29** [S] 1 point 1 month ago  
 ↓ I guess I don't understand what you consider a "troll." What about my question, or how I've asked it makes you call me troll?  
[permalink](#) [parent](#)
- ↑ [-] **psycho\_admin** 1 point 1 month ago  
 ↓ You ask a question about 2 hot topic with no context, what do you expect me to think? Why didn't you clarify the question, for example in what country are you talking about? Or are you talking about gun ownership, crime rates, victims of crimes with guns, or perpetrators of crimes with games?  
[permalink](#) [parent](#)
- ↑ [-] **xaxa29** [S] 1 point 1 month ago  
 ↓ Ok, sure, I can clarify a bit. I left it open, because I am interested in whatever angles people read the question from. Guns and Race in the United States is of interest, yes, but I am also interested in what someone might think of Guns and Race relations outside of the US, or Guns and Race relations between the US and other countries. I have left it open, because I am interested in what comes to someones mind. People can read it differently, their experiences can inform how they read this question. Anyway, Gun ownership, crime rates, victims and perpetrators, arms dealing, economics, you name it. Just interested in what opinions are out there. I grew up on the west coast, between Oregon, California, and Washington. I've had interesting

- conversations with people about guns with people who work as police officers, with people who live in poor communities, college students, and my own family, as all the men in my family hunt, and we eat a range of game. So, I don't want anyone to think I am trying to argue in one way or the other, I'm trying to understand where people are coming from on these topics.  
[permalink](#) [parent](#)
- ↑ [-] **xaxa29** [S] 1 point 1 month ago  
 ↓ Do folks think one race enjoys guns for reasons that other races don't? Or do some people think some races suffer more than others because of gun misuse? I can read online, i read articles, but I am interested in the dialogue, too.  
[permalink](#) [parent](#)
- ↑ [-] **r10d10** 0 points 1 month ago  
 ↓ At least in America, it seems that there is more of a correlation between Region and Guns. In southern states practically everybody carries, but up north it is harder to get a concealed weapon permit. If it were easier, I would say more people would have them.  
[permalink](#)
- ↑ [-] **xaxa29** [S] 1 point 1 month ago  
 ↓ Interesting to think about getting gun permits or not. Do you think there could be a trend of some people being discriminated against based on race, when trying to get a gun? Or rather? In what Southern states do you think most people carry guns?  
[permalink](#) [parent](#)

**Sharita Towne**  
March 28 · 🌐

GUNS AND RACE. Go Facebook, tell me. High school friends, university friends, family friends, friends friends, facebook friends. Lets have a friendly chat about Guns and Race. I want to know what these two words bring to mind for you! You can private message me if you don't want to comment here!

Like · Comment · Share

---

👍 Erin [REDACTED] and Maria [REDACTED] like this.

---

**Amy** [REDACTED] wish we could do this in the kitchen while we wait for the press to settle.  
March 28 at 12:54pm · Like · 👍 1

**Ben** [REDACTED] Guns should go away. Nothing but death, fear, anxiety, and the crippling of people and communities comes from guns.  
March 28 at 1:05pm · Like · 👍 1

**Barney** [REDACTED] Starter pistols start most races so there's an obvious connection.  
March 28 at 1:14pm · Like · 👍 3

**Quen** [REDACTED] black on black crime..the gov't supplying guns to Mexican cartels..Texas militias..Uncle Sam..  
March 28 at 1:30pm · Like · 👍 1

**Adam** [REDACTED] A friendly chat about guns and race. I like it! Here are some conversation starters: A white person is five times as likely to die by a suicide by gun, than by a homicide. And African-Americans are five times as likely to die by homicide from a gun than by suicide. The NRA is an overwhelmingly white organization that promotes policies that exacerbate gun violence in overwhelmingly black communities.  
March 28 at 1:33pm · Like · 👍 4

**Barney** [REDACTED] The US Government is an overwhelmingly white organization that passes legislation that exacerbates gun violence in overwhelmingly black communities.  
March 28 at 1:44pm · Like · 👍 3

**Quen** [REDACTED] young black males murder 14 times more than young white males..but its usually other young black males that are being murdered..  
March 28 at 1:46pm · Like · 👍 1


**Adam** [REDACTED] This image speaks for itself: <http://bit.ly/1g8it1T>

 US gun owners want the right to order Caramel Frappuccinos while fully armed. I Protest I... [www.colors magazine.com](http://www.colors magazine.com)  
Colors Magazine, a magazine about the rest of the world. US gun owners want the ... See More

March 28 at 2:07pm · Like · 👍 1

**Jeremy** [REDACTED] Muscle Beaches and Nascar  
March 28 at 2:09pm · Like

**Adam** [REDACTED] And this one... <http://bit.ly/1g8jlja>

 **Negroes with guns - Robert F. Williams**  
[libcom.org](http://libcom.org)  
First published in 1962, Negroes with Guns is the story of a southern black comm... See More


March 28 at 2:17pm · Like · 👍 1

**Adam** [REDACTED] And these... <http://bit.ly/1mbSg80>  
March 28 at 2:25pm · Like · 👍 1

**Adrian** [REDACTED] You know the one time the NRA supported gun restrictions is when the Black Panthers went to Sacramento with guns.  
March 28 at 2:47pm · Like · 👍 4


**Adrian** [REDACTED] Also, look up a clip from the, I think 2008 CNN YouTube republican debate in which a white man fires off an automatic rifle and asks the candidates what they will blah blah, note the overwhelmingly white crowd's reaction, now imagine what they would do if the man with the gun were black, or Hispanic. I'd find the clip but I'm on a shitty phone.  
March 28 at 2:49pm · Like · 👍 2

**Deric** [REDACTED]

 The experts agree...  
Idi Amin Stalin Pol Pot Hitler  
Mao Tse Tung Gaddafi Kim Jong Il Castro  
Gun control works!


March 28 at 2:57pm · Like

**Adam** [REDACTED] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shooting\\_of\\_Trayvon\\_Martin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shooting_of_Trayvon_Martin) ✕

 Shooting of Trayvon Martin - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia  
[en.wikipedia.org](http://en.wikipedia.org)  
On the night of February 26, 2012, in Sanford, Florida, United States, George Zl... See More

March 28 at 3:06pm · Like

**Barney** [REDACTED] and these....here a white man enjoy's sport shooting





March 28 at 3:08pm · Like



**Barney** Here, a processional white man works with a crazy brown person to clean up the streets



March 28 at 3:08pm · Like



**Jeremy** Marley Lion shooting

March 28 at 3:20pm · Like



**Garret** I find it is usually the most ignorant and annoying people that do the most talking and claim to know what is best on those subjects.

March 28 at 3:23pm · Like · 1



**Quen** gun control..



March 28 at 5:30pm · Like · 2



**Deric** Finally off work and now I can put my 2 cents in.  
If you banned guns do you think every gangbanger in America will turn their guns in? Of course not so with that being said you would just take guns out of the hands of law abiding citizens trying to ... See More

March 28 at 6:53pm · Like · 3



**Shaunte** Discrimination and fucked off laws similar to the laws that made crack a bigger offense than coke.

March 29 at 8:18am · Like · 1



**Trouble** Biathlon, natch

March 29 at 8:21am · Like · 1



**Marisa** White people love them

March 30 at 12:01am · Like



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